

An Analysis of Letter Writing Style in Japanese and English and its Relation to Cultural Differences

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In this study, the form and content of two letters in English and Japanese are analysed in order to see to what extent cultural differences affect the way a text is organised. These two letters have the same specific communicative purpose of requesting payment. The English letter is sent by the TV Licence Company in the UK, which requests payment for a TV licence. The Japanese letter is from a telephone company in Japan, KDD, which also requests payment for KDD's telecommunication charges. Of special interest is to investigate how meaning is created in different cultures in order to achieve the same communicative purposes by the letters. These two letters are compared from three points of view: organisation, politeness, and reader or writer-orientation. This analysis of the two letters has yielded interesting differences. Hofstede's (1980) dimensions, which are 'Individualism' and 'Uncertainty avoidance', can be used in order to explain these differences.

Key words: cultural differences, communicative purpose, discourse organisation, politeness, reader-orientation, writer-orientation, individualism, uncertainty avoidance

Introduction

Some linguists claim that cultural differences affect the way a text is organised. It is interesting to discuss to what extent their organisation differs,

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and to what extent that culture accounts for these differences. In this study, two letters in British English (henceforth English) and Japanese which have the same sort of communicative purpose, but emanating from different cultures are analysed. These two letters have the same specific communicative purpose of requesting payment. The English letter is sent by the TV Licence Company in the UK, which requests payment for a TV licence (see Appendix 1). The Japanese letter is from a telephone company, KDD, which also requests payment for telecommunications charges (see Appendix 2). Of special interest here is to investigate how meaning is created in different cultures to achieve the same communicative purpose by the letters. In both cases, the readers and writers do not know each other and do not have special background knowledge about the content of the letters. The ultimate aim is to request payment for their services and if they do not pay, they will be fined. A difference between the two services is that readers of the English letter are supposed to buy a TV licence before they start watching, whereas readers of the Japanese letter are supposed to have already had services from KDD and their payment might be delayed.

Firstly, I shall discuss features of the English letter and the Japanese letter. Variations in discourse organisation across the two cultures are compared, and the ways of placing of the main point are also described. The following aspects for analysis are explained, in turn, politeness and reader- or writer-orientation. Finally, I shall discuss the differences and partial similarities of the features in English and Japanese to account for these differences.

Main points of the Japanese letter are translated into English by KDD (see Appendix 3), but the information content has not been fully translated in the English version and also the features of the text have been slightly changed. Therefore, the fuller English translation of the Japanese letter by the writer is included to aid understanding the content (see Appendix 4).

Organisation

Both the English letter and the Japanese letter consist of five parts. However, their contents are slightly different. While the English letter is made up of a head title, a salutation, a body, an ending and a postscript, the Japanese

letter consists of a head title, a salutation, a greeting, a body, and others. The typical part in Japanese letters is a greeting. Before starting the body, formulaic words of thanks are expressed (Appendix 2, line 3).

Both letters have the head title, which can be interpreted as the main point. The head title in English, 'You could be fined up to £1,000.' (Appendix 1, line 1) gives us a strong impression. This is because the focus is put on a fine, which must be paid if people use a TV without a licence illegally. In the Japanese letter, the head title is 'A favour of payment for KDD service charges' (Appendix 2, line 1) and there is no mention about a fine. Only from their titles, it can be supposed that their approaches to request payment are different.

The body in the English letter has four paragraphs. An opening paragraph (Appendix 1, line 3-5) suddenly begins with the main topic, and every key information is clearly described: about the necessity of a valid TV licence, the possibility of TV licence evasion and a fine including the amount, £1,000 (line 5). The second paragraph (line 6-8) emphasises the consequences in case the reader might illegally use a TV. The same information has been mentioned already in the first paragraph; however, it is repeated in a different expression. This is an effective method to reinforce the main point. The third paragraph (line 9-10) explains how to pay in detail, and important numbers such as cost, £101.00 for colour TV and £33.50 for black and white TV and a telephone number. Almost the same content about how to pay appears in the postscript again. The last paragraph (line 12-16) begins with apology and finally concludes in reminding the reader of a TV licence.

The body of the Japanese letter (Appendix 2, line 4-24) is considered to consist of four paragraphs. The layout might be more complex than the English letter. The first paragraph (line 4-6) introduces the main topic without the details such as charges or a fine yet, but it covers the whole key information. What differs from the English letter in terms of the order of the organisation is apology which is expressed in the second paragraph (Appendix 2, line 7-8), and appears in the last paragraph in the English letter. The third paragraph (line 9-13) includes one table (line 10-13) about important information such as the customer number, year and month of issue, the bill number and charges; thus, it should be included in the body. If this part is

explained in some sentences, this might be more confusing in conveying information. To use the table is one of the effective methods to optically appeal to the reader. The last paragraph (line 14-24) includes date of suspension in case the payment has not been made. What differs most distinctively from the English letter is the description about the fine (line 23-24). It says that the rate of fine is 14.6 percent per year. In the English letter, the description about the fine appears even in the head title and also in the body, whereas the font size of this part in the Japanese letter is the smallest. One possible interpretation is that the small letters are usually used for extra information such as footnotes. If the readers need to keep reading for more information, they can continue. If they do not, they can stop in the middle. Therefore, the font size is getting smaller and smaller from the first to the end, even though the last part might be the most important for some people. The second interpretation is that the impression to the customers might be in consideration. If the font size of this part is bigger or the biggest, it may give a bad impression of the company that obviously wishes to make profits. The last assumption, which might be too cautious, is they expect that somebody might miss this information because the size is too small. On this assumption, the fine would be more important than charges.

In the last sentence (line 25), there is mention about how to pay in detail, which has been stated in the body as well. This is additional information.

Politeness

Requests are by definition face threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1978); the variety of direct and indirect ways for making requests is probably socially motivated by the need to minimize the imposition in the act itself (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984). 'Negative politeness strategies convey the speaker's [or the writer's] respect for the addressee and his/her lack of intention to impede the addressee's freedom', (Maier, 1992: 195). Negative politeness strategies are apparent in apologies and requests. Positive politeness strategies are employed 'by fulfilling the addressee's wants (giving compliments and showing interest, for example) and by showing the addressee that the two of them are cooperators who want the same things and share

common ground' (1992: 200). However, there is always a potential risk to use positive politeness strategies in apologies or requests, because the necessary condition must be met. The addressee must agree that the speaker or the writer does indeed belong to the addressee's group when these strategies are used. As for the letters used in this study, there is no private relationship between the reader of the letter and the companies. Therefore, it would be natural that no positive politeness strategies could be found in both letters.

Maier notes striking differences in the use of politeness strategies between native and non-native speakers of English. According to his research, native speakers of English shows a sensitivity to politeness strategies and use more negative politeness strategies to preserve the addressee's face in business letters; for example, mitigating their apologies more, expressing thanks more often and being less direct. It is not my intention to discuss this result but to use these three strategies as a framework for examining how differently these three strategies are used in the English and the Japanese letter.

Apology is expressed after the main point has been shown in the English letter, whereas apology comes before the details of the main point in Japanese. One reason for the different order might be because apology is not considered as the main point in English. It might be said that the Japanese letter employs more negative politeness strategies, rather than it is more polite. This can be thought a kind of a formulaic phrase for every public service company's letter. Although the order of apology is different, the content of apology is almost the same in both letters. The similar purpose behind the apology will be that both companies take into consideration the possibility that they may make a mistake. They can pre-empt any customer by placing an apology beforehand. Example cases are as follows: the case that the reader of the English letter has already bought a TV licence or does not watch TV, or the reader of the Japanese letter has already paid the charges.

Expressing thanks can be found only in the Japanese letter, which appears in the first paragraph of the body (Appendix 2, line 3). For one reason, it will be natural because the readers of the Japanese letter are the customers of the Japanese company, who have already had services from them. Another reason is words of thanks are one of the formulaic greeting parts in Japanese letters

(Jenkins and Hinds, 1987: 337).

Hedging devices can be used to avoid direct manifestation. According to Hyland's (1994) definition, hedging refers to words or phrases implying that the writer is less than fully committed to the certainty of information. The use of hedging is important for the following reasons: it supports the writer's position and builds writer-reader relationships and it allows the writer to claim with due caution, modesty and humility.

In the English letter (Appendix 1), the frequent use of modals and subjunctive forms can be seen to express hypothetical or future states of affairs. Modal verbs (single-underlined) such as 'could' and 'would' appear eight times in total and 'if' clauses (double-underlined) seven times.

In Japanese letters, linguistic devices such as respect languages are tactfully used to show politeness (Jenkins and Hinds, 1987): honorific language (*keigo*), which is defined along with two intersecting planes: *teineigo* ("polite language") and *sonkeigo* ("respectful language"). *Sonkeigo* is used to refer to the actions of superiors and *kenjoogo* ("humble language") is to refer to one's own actions. These respect languages in Japanese have the role of hedging. More details about respect languages are discussed in the next section.

Reader or writer-orientation

While American English business letter writing has a reader orientation the purpose is 'to attempt to get the reader to appreciate the benefits of doing what the writer wants', Japanese business letters are oriented to 'the relationship, or the space, between the writer and the reader' (Jenkins and Hinds, 1987). Some features of the English and the Japanese letters can support this statement from the following points of view: as for the English letter, the level of directness of requesting strategies, linguistic devices of pronoun use and sentence structure, and lexical repetition or reiteration, as for the Japanese letter expression of thanks and apology and respect languages described above.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain present nine requesting strategy types: mood derivative, explicit performatives, hedged performative, locution derivable, scope stating, language specific suggestory formula, reference to preparatory

conditions, strong hints and mild hints (1984: 202). The level of directness weakens accordingly. The most direct and explicit strategy type Mood derivable is frequently used in the English letter, where 'the grammatical mood of the verb in the utterance marks its illocutionary force as a request'. Example sentences in Appendix 1 are shown as follows:

- (1) ...please get one immediately (line 8)
- (2) ...call our helpline on 0990 763 763... (line 11)
- (3) ...please fill in the relevant section overleaf and return the whole form to us... (line 13)
- (4) ...please get properly licensed now (line 16)

The use of pronouns *you* and *we* (boxed), rather than impersonal or third person pronouns, is effectively used to involve the reader in the letter. The repetition of 'you' gives an impression that the letter is personal, which is effective to make readers conscious about the letter. 'You' appears 15 times in total, 'we' and 'I' twice each (Appendix 1). Passive structures are extremely avoided to get the message across. Few subordinate clauses are used not to make sentences complex. Therefore, sentences tend to be short. These linguistic features might be considered to make the letter accessible to any kind of readers. It is not clear to what extent the readers are literate or illiterate, or whether their background knowledge is sufficient to understand the message. From these aspects, it would be said that the English letter is aware of readers.

In the English letter, a lot of sentences about a 'licence' are repeated and paraphrased. Actually, the words 'licence', 'licensed' and 'licensing' (shaded) can be seen 13 times in total, the words 'TV' or 'television' (also shaded) are used seven times. When a request has obvious financial benefits for the reader, a brief, one sentence-letter is sufficient (Shurter, 1971). In this case, the reader might suffer financial loss; therefore, the same message may be repeated in various ways to ensure the reader understands the situation. Also, these two words are key words in the letter; therefore they are emphasised by repetition. Lexical reiteration can be seen to express the similar meaning. Synonyms such as 'soon' (line 8), 'immediately' (line 8) and 'now' (line 16) are used to avoid

repeating the same word.

Japanese business letter writing, in contrast to English letter writing, can be said to have orientation toward ‘the relationship, or the space, between the writer and the reader’. Firstly, thanks and apology are expressed with formulaic words to establish or maintain the appropriate relationship between the writer and the reader in Japanese letters. Usually, these expressions are used in the greeting part (Jenkins and Hinds, 1987). Impersonal Japanese letters are achieved through the use of honorific language. In the Japanese letter, a substantial amount of honorifics are used. In Appendix 2, expressions with the sole purpose of establishing and continuing the relationship between the writer and the reader are marked. Honorific language (*keigo*) consists of *teineigo* (“polite language”), *sonkeigo* (“respectful language”) and *kenjoogo* (“humble language”), whose definitions have been already mentioned in the last section. Harada (1976) strictly classifies Japanese honorifics, however, his classification would be too complex to use in this study. Therefore, I limit myself to the specific honorifics which appear frequently in the Japanese letter. The general Japanese title, *sama* (boxed), corresponding to English ‘Mr’, ‘Ms’, ‘Mrs’ and ‘Miss’, appears four times. A lot of nouns are marked with the honorific prefix *o-* and *go-* (single-underlined) (22 times). “Polite language” (shaded) is also very frequently used (16 times). “Humble language” (wavy-underlined) (12 times) is more frequently used than “respectful language” (dotted-lined) (once). These numbers might show the writer attempts to respect the reader by humbling himself/herself.

Discussion and Conclusion

This analysis of the two letters has yielded interesting differences in the organisation structure, the use of politeness and point of view orientation. On the whole, different approaches are taken to achieve the same purpose. As for the organisation, while the English letter places the main point first and emphasizes it by repeating in slight different expressions several times, the Japanese letter begins with general information and gradually shifts to the main point. Each letter has different politeness strategies; for example, in the Japanese letter, apology appears in the earlier paragraph, by contrast, in the

English letter, it comes in the last paragraph. Both of the two letters use different hedging devices because their languages themselves are different. A substantial amount of modal verbs and 'if' clauses are used in the English letter. Respect languages are frequently used in the Japanese letter. The Japanese letter generally seems to put more emphasis on politeness strategies than the English letter. Based on several features, the English letter is reader-oriented, the Japanese letter is oriented to the relationship or the space, between the writer and the reader.

When we think about to what extent culture accounts for these differences found above, Hofstede's (1980) investigation about the differences in work-related values by groups of countries could be useful. Two dimensions out of four, which he raises, can be used to explain the cultural differences of the English letter and the Japanese letter in this study. They are the second dimension, 'Individualism' and the fourth dimension, 'Uncertainty avoidance'. According to his research, while individualism is more important in Great Britain, collectivism is more highly thought of in Japan. This means the ties between individuals are loose in Great Britain; however, people from birth onward are integrated into strong and coherent groups in Japan. The high value of 'uncertainty avoidance' in Japan means that when Japanese people are in unstructured situations, they feel uncomfortable rather than in structured ones and try to avoid such situations. By contrast, in Great Britain the value is low to middle, which shows that British people prefer unstructured situations.

Looking back onto the features of the two letters, this cultural difference between the two countries is reflected in terms of 'Individualism' and 'Uncertainty avoidance'. Expressing thanks and apology at the beginning of the Japanese letter, which are in rather formulaic phrases, are to raise the customers' position higher. After the structured situation is decided between the customer and the company, they feel comfortable and can go on to the details. What matters most is to keep the preferable relationship between them in the letter. This Japanese cultural feature proves that the Japanese letter has orientation toward the relationship or the space, between the writer and the reader. In the British culture, where individualism and lower uncertainty avoidance are valued, it does not cause a very serious problem no matter how

the reader may feel threatened by or angry at the English letter, whose main point is strongly and directly expressed.

Even in the two letters, there can be considerable differences. Because of the limited number of the examples, these differences should not be generalized and all of the differences are not due to the cultural differences. However, I believe that it is worth looking at and discussing the causes of the differences between the English and the Japanese letters as is done in this study.

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Appendix 1

TVLISENSING[®]The Present Occupier
(Address)Date:
Ref (V): 02554624
Ref (L): 1920409543Tel: 0990 001014
Fax: 0121 770 6744
MiniCom: 0121 717 27261 **You could be fined up to £1,000.**

2 Dear Sir/Madam

3 We have no record of a valid licence for this address. That means you could be breaking the law.4 If you use a TV or Video to receive or record television programmes, you need a valid licence.5 Otherwise you could be taken to court and fined up to £1,000.6 If you had been found using a TV without a licence today, you would have been cautioned and an
7 official interview would have taken place. You could then have been prosecuted. A further visit
8 will be made to your address soon, so if you need a licence please get one immediately.9 A licence costs £101.00 for colour and £33.50 for black and white. You can pay by post, Direct
10 Debit, credit or debit card or at a post office. If you have problems paying the full amount of the
11 licence fee call our helpline on 0990 763 763 – we can usually help.12 If you do have a licence, or do not use a TV, I'm sorry for any concern this letter may have caused.
13 If this is the case please fill in the relevant section overleaf and return the whole form to us in
14 the pre-paid envelope provided, making sure the return address is showing in the envelope window.
15 I would remind you that TV licence evasion is against the law and could result in a fine of up to
16 £1,000. If you have a licence and you use a TV, please get properly licensed now.

17 Yours Faithfully

18 TV Licensing Officer19
20P.S. You can now pay for your licence by Direct Debit, credit or debit card over the
phone. Just call 0990 22 66 66 with your bank and licence details to hand.

Appendix 2

1

KDD 料金お支払いのお願い (REMINDER)

再請求

平成 11 年 11 月 30 日

(REISSUANCE)

1999/11/30

(住所)

(氏名)

様

KDD

KDD 株式会社

お問合せ先 (INFORMATION)

お客様センターサービス 1 G
0120-860-302 (通話料金無料 TOLL FREE)
お取扱時間 9:00-21:00

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

日頃、KDD をご利用いただきましてありがとうございます。

さて、下記の KDD 料金の請求書を送付させていただきましたが、まだ入金の確認がとれておりません。つきましては、本状により、お近くの金融機関、郵便局、コンビニエンス・ストアにて至急お支払いいただきますようお願いいたします。

既にお支払いにもかかわらず、本状が届きました場合には、行き違いでございますので何卒ご容赦願います。

9

お問い合わせの際は、下記のお客様番号をお知らせ下さい。

10

お客様番号 (CUSTOMER NUMBER)	068040151932
請求年月 (YEAR, MONTH OF ISSUE)	平成 11 年 10 月 (1999/10)
請求書番号 (BILL NUMBER)	X1-369129-E
ご請求金額 (CHARGES)	4,057 円

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

〈ご 注 意〉

お客様からのご入金が弊社にて確認できるまでに日数がかかりますので、お支払い後すぐにご利用されるときには、上記問合せ先にご連絡いただけますようお願いいたします。このまま弊社での入金確認ができない場合には、下記の期日から KDD の通信サービスのお取り扱いを停止(既に停止中の場合は継続)させていただきます。

21

22

ご利用停止予定日 (DATE OF SUSPENSION)	平成 11 年 12 月 13 日 (1999 / 12 / 13)
すでに停止中の場合は、継続させていただきます。	

25

26

下の部分を切り取り、この用紙にて金融機関、郵便局の各窓口へお払い込みをお願いいたします。
(Please tear off at the perforated line, and use the form below to make payment.)

23

24

このままお支払いがない場合は、お支払期日の翌日から起算して、年 14.6% の率で遅延損害金をいただくこととなります。

Appendix 3

Payment Request For Telecommunications Charges
--

Thank you for using KDD's telecommunications services.

We have not yet received payment for the enclosed bill for KDD's telecommunications charges.

Please make the payment immediately through your local bank, post office or KDD office.

If the bill is bar-coded, the payment may be made through any major convenience store throughout Japan.

Warning

If we do not receive payment for the charges, your KDD's telecommunications services will be discontinued (or will remain so if already discontinued) as of the given date
(DATE OF SUSPENSION)

Appendix 4

Payment Request for Telecommunications Charges (REMINDER)

(Address)
(Name)
Mr./Ms.

Thank you for using KDD's telecommunications services.

We have not yet received payment for the enclosed bill for KDD's telecommunications charges.

Please make the payment immediately through your local bank, post office or convenience store.

If your payment and our letter have crossed in the mail, please forgive us for sending this.

For any enquiry, please let us know your customer number below.

CUSTOMER NUMBER	068040151932
YEAR, MONTH OF ISSUE	1999/10
BILL NUMBER	X1-369129-E
CHARGES	¥ 4,057

Please tear off at the perforated line, and use the form below to make payment.

REISSUANCE

1999/11/30

KDD KDD Corporation

INFORMATION

Customer Service

0120-860-302 (TOLL FREE)

9:00-21:00

<Warning>

It will take time before we receive payment. If you would like to use KDD communications services soon after you make payment, please contact with KDD Customer service above.

If we do not receive payment for the charges, your KDD's telecommunications services will be discontinued (or will remain so if already discontinued) as of the given date.

DATE OF SUSPENSION

1999/12/13

KDD's telecommunications services will remain so if already discontinued

The charges for the overdue payment at the rate of 14.6 % will be required from the next date of the payment deadline, if we do not receive payment for the charges.